Ambichronous historiography: Colin Rowe and the teaching of architectural history

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Figure 1: Colin Rowe and student in studio; University of Texas at Austin, Alexander Architectural Archives, Harwell Hamilton Harris Papers, Audry L. Brians’ scrapbook, circa 1954–55.

Architectural design education has typically treated historical knowledge as inferior to design creativity or even worse an impediment to innovation. If history is seen of as having any value for the student it is not tantamount with design but rather in service of it. This curricular instrumentalism is all too familiar for those teaching history in design programs even today. When historical knowledge and design creativity are conceived as mutually exclusive, history is seen as a subordinate tool at the service of design.

The mid-twentieth century arrival of European art historians at American schools of architecture saw each émigré met with similar challenges. Art history departments had no design emphasis, but teaching history to architecture students whose highest priority was the design studio was a difficult and marginalized
position. The research I have been undertaking charts the moments in which historians have responded to this condition in their own teaching practice in order to liberate, rather than subdue, innovation. In these circumstances, historical knowledge and design creativity are open to participate in each other; design knowledge yielding historical creativity becomes a possibility, for example. Innovation, then, expands beyond merely a prospect of design to the way one inquires of both the past and future, creatively and analytically.

This essay focuses specifically on the British educator and critic Colin Rowe (1920–99), during his time teaching at the University of Texas in Austin in the 1950s. It is split into three episodes: the first elucidates and expands on the primary themes that emerge in Rowe’s teaching at the University of Texas; the second episode shows how Rowe’s didactic methods were effective outside the university by detailing an exchange with Louis Kahn and his design for a Jewish Community Center; the third episode closely analyzes Rowe’s essay ‘Chicago Frame’ as a conceptual framing operative within historiography itself. Rowe embodied the figure I call Ianus Architectus, which is the Latin combination of the architect with the ancient Roman god of beginnings and ends, pasts and futures, Janus. It represents the dual act of both seeing past-and-future (Janus’ two faces), and producing (architecture), simultaneously. In other words, Ianus Architectus is ambichronous, operating between the history and practice of architecture, at the interface of precedent and innovation. Trained in architectural design and art history, Colin Rowe was the most active participant in the academic interface between histories and practices of architecture. In three episodes, this essay argues that Rowe’s teaching was ambichronous, as he attempted to engage with history while liberating innovation.

Rowe was a skilled historian, but he was probably more skilled as a teacher and critic. His impressive collection of essays, while historiographical, were above all critical and even iconoclast. Thus, while his historical knowledge was immense,

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1 The essay evolved from a paper delivered at the Journal of Art Historiography Colloquium titled “The History of Architectural Historiography”, held at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, Norway, in June 2015. The author thanks Professor Branko Mitrovic for his hospitality and academic support. Much gratitude is also given to Kevin Keim at the Charles Moore Foundation in Austin, where the Colin Rowe Library is safely kept, as well as the Alexander Architectural Archives at the University of Texas in Austin.

2 ‘But what god am I to say though art, Janus of double shape? For Greece hath no divinity like thee. The reason, too, unfold why alone of all the heavenly one though dost see both back and front. (…) “Now learn the reason for my shape, though already you perceive it in part. Every door has two fronts, this way and that, whereof one faces the people and the other the house-god; and just as your human porter, seated at the threshold of the house-door, sees who goes out and in, so I, the porter of the heavenly court, behold at once both East and West.”’ From Ovid (43 BC – 17 AD), Fasti, translation by James George Frazer, Loeb Classical Library, London: University of Harvard Press, 1931.
to call Rowe merely a historian would not do justice to his interests. Historiography was only one side of his ambichronous teaching practice. Or as Christian Otto has put it, ‘his central interest was producing architectural objects, not writing history.’

For Rowe, invention was not possible without knowledge of precedents. According to Otto, ‘Rowe’s position about history derived its authority from four characteristics, unique to him in their combination’: the ‘sharpness of his eye’, ‘unexpected yet telling juxtaposition’ of materials, ‘exceptional richness’ due to Rowe’s erudition in literature and philosophy, and the ‘quality of Rowe’s writing’.

Each of these four characteristics was ‘amplified by the means Rowe employed to activate them: the Wölfflinian mechanism of compare and contrast.’ A lecture manuscript arranged according to the Wölfflinian mechanism (Figure 2) exhibits the unexpected juxtaposition, for instance, of Le Corbusier’s Villa Schwob (1916) compared to St. Peter’s Cathedral (1506–1626). Unexpected because anachronous, but warranted because ambichronous in the didactic context of teaching architectural history.

Figure 2: Colin Rowe, lecture manuscript indicating the buildings to be compared with two slides (the ‘Wölfflinian mechanism’), undated; Colin Rowe Library, Charles Moore Foundation, Austin, Texas.

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5 Otto, ‘Orientation and Invention’, 118; the Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin (1864-1945) is credited with the dual slide projector technique in lectures used to compare sets of images.
Episide 1: Teaching in Texas

Rowe brought these methods, talents, and mechanisms to the University of Texas, Austin, from 1953 to 1956. But when he arrived what kind of academic environment was he entering? A document from Rowe’s papers dated March of 1954 depicts an environment in need of change. Probably written by Harwell Hamilton Harris, made director of the school of architecture in 1952, it is an appraisal of the design program over the first two-and-a-half years of his leadership. The following observations are made:

1. Design instruction appears to be a very one sided process. The teacher remains almost exclusively in the position of critic, in the merely passive position of receiving and at best reviewing the students’ reactions. There is never or seldom anything put in to the students’ mind. We cannot expect to go on extracting ideas and schemes from the student without first and continually feeding his mind and imagination.

2. It seems that at present design is taught in the same way in all four years. This teaching follows the pattern: assignment of problem – instruction and critique – judgment of solution – review. ( ... )

3. It seems obvious, that under the current system of design instruction the student has no or only very little chance to learn and to improve. To chase him through a succession of problems characterized as building types resembles rather a hurdle race and not an educational process. ( ... )

Harris would step down as director about a year later, leaving to focus on his architectural practice. In the same document though, he included a set of program goals in response to the prior observations, which he refers to as ‘the problem of education’:

1. ( ... ) Any educational program of a school of architecture cannot be based on the mechanics of a professional occupation but only on the intellectual content and spiritual meaning of architecture.

2. ( ... ) sense of unity, of wholeness, of continuity. Facts of knowledge or experience must not be isolated but related. It is important to think and conceive in patterns of a comprehensible whole.

Author unknown, appraisal of architectural design program at University of Texas, Austin, Colin Rowe Library, Charles Moore Foundation.
3. At a time of diminishing traditional and material limitations and resulting freedom of expression, it is important to develop the capacity to distinguish, to discriminate, and the power to select.\footnote{Author unknown, appraisal of architectural design program at University of Texas, Austin.}

One might paraphrase the three earlier observations as follows: there is the ‘passive’ instructor reviewing students’ reactions without ever putting anything ‘into their minds’, this happens at all levels of instruction, and this system gives the student no chance to learn. And the responses: a distinction is made between a vocational program and an educational program, where the former is based on the ‘mechanics of the profession’ and the latter on the ‘meaning of architecture’; students need to be able to relate and connect their knowledge and experiences into a whole, and; in a time of expanding architectural methods and tastes, the ability to discern and judge is of the highest importance. To abstract this even further, Harris saw his design program lacking in that students were not being given the nourishment they needed in order to be creative and inventive, and their abilities in both the integration of knowledge and analytical comparisons were underdeveloped.

By the time this appraisal was written in 1954, Rowe had been teaching at Austin for only a year. He and the other ‘Texas Rangers’\footnote{See Alexander Caragonne, The Texas Rangers: Notes from the Architectural Underground, Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1993.}, as they would be known, would become the manifestation of Harris’ ideal responses. An undated letter of Rowe’s – which appears to have been a mandatory survey of faculty ambitions – titled ‘Teaching, Research, and Practice Interests and Objectives’\footnote{Colin Rowe, ‘Teaching, Research, and Practice Interests and Objectives’, Colin Rowe Library, Charles Moore Foundation. The date is unmarked, but the document appears in a folder with a letter from 1978, recommending James Stirling for the Pritzker Prize – which he would receive in 1981 – as well as a letter to Peter Eisenman regarding Oppositions (1970). Lévi-Strauss’ use and popularization of the term ‘bricolage’ did not appear until the 1960s, and Rowe used it in the 1970s for Collage City. All this suggests the document is from Rowe’s time at Cornell in the 1970s, which I do not think renders it irrelevant to the concerns raised by Harris in the 1950s.} could be read as a set of answers to Harris’ observations. Rowe begins with a brief objection to the ‘arbitrary’ categories of teaching, research, and practice, before responding on his own terms:

What can the objectives of a teacher be? To conceal his or her incompetence? To improve the world in general? To render some people more acute, intense and skeptical than, without the confrontation, they ever might have been? To attempt to make certain...
areas of knowledge more solid and more available than, at present, they may be?

It is clear that Rowe views teaching not as a transfer of data from instructor to student, nor does he view it merely as knowledge of the past. Instead, teaching for Rowe is about improving the world by provoking students to be more curious about it. Rowe’s response to ‘Research’ invoked a quote from Picasso:

> Among the several sins that I have been accused of committing, none is more false than the one that I have, as the principal objective in my work, the spirit of research. When I paint my objective is to show what I have found and not what I am looking for …. We all know that Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth, at least the truth that is given us to understand. The artist must know the manner whereby to convince others of the truthfulness of his lies. If he only shows in his work that he has searched, and researched, for the way to put over lies, we should never accomplish anything. The idea of research has often made painting go astray…Perhaps this has been the principal fault of modern art. The spirit of research has poisoned those who have not fully understood all the positive and conclusive elements in modern art…

Rowe’s research objectives were analogous to Picasso’s artistic interests. Just as his teaching objectives provoked questioning the world instead of trying to know it, Rowe’s research aims were not to search for truth but to construct fictions that reveal it to us. In other words, Rowe’s research did not look for history; rather, it showed what he had found in it.

Rowe’s earlier journey to practicing architecture was interrupted by a fractured spine during military service at the age of twenty-three (1943), while a student at University of Liverpool. Since then he had referred to himself as an ‘architect manqué’ for this reason. He aspired to be an architect but ultimately found it to be ‘impractical’, thus:

(…) for better or worse, my own ‘practice’ has been largely confined to teaching: for worse because I might have wished it otherwise, for

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11 Anthony Vidler, ‘Two or Three Tings I Know about Him’, *ANY* 7/8, September 1994, 47.
better because I am aware that, whatever methods I have employed, have, on the whole, been highly suggestive and successful.

As a teacher it has always been my conviction that ‘the design process’ should be envisaged as an encapsulated, or accelerated, version of the history of science which, however such it may be the chronicle of false hypotheses, is scarcely an arbitrary development.

This is a soft reference to Karl Popper and his principle of falsifiability, or, conjectures and refutations. In such an encapsulation, the students’ design process (drawings and models) would be the manifestation of their attempts to falsify certain hypotheses about architecture. The design work would not seek to prove a theory, but rather to disprove it. Then, a revised theory (conjecture) about architecture may be proposed. Indeed, there is nothing arbitrary about this, as Rowe says. Moreover, it follows from his philosophy of teaching as provocations of curiosity and his view of research (from Picasso) as constructing fictions and showing what was found.

Rowe concludes his response in an uncharacteristic way. He moves away from describing what he does to describing what he is:

At a less theoretical level I am a quasi-eclectic with an ultimate allegiance to the traditions of Synthetic Cubism; I have never supposed that, in architecture, the establishment of chronological iron curtains (c. 1923, c. 1890, etc.) was a very useful operation; and, as a modus vivendi, I have habitually performed with both a studio situation and some kind of historical lecture sequence.

To borrow from Levi-Strauss the notion of bricolage, I am, I imagine, a type of pedagogic bricoleur who is not innocent of the promptings of ‘science’. 12

A typed quote of Diderot circa 1755 from Rowe’s papers explains what he means by ‘quasi-eclectic’:

An eclectic is a philosopher who tramples underfoot prejudice, tradition, seniority, universal consent, authority and everything which subjugates mass opinion; who dares to think for himself, go back to the clearest general principles, examine them, discuss them, and accept nothing except on the evidence of his own experience and reason; and who, from all the philosophies which he has analyzed

without respect to persons, and without partiality, makes a philosophy of his own peculiar to himself.\textsuperscript{13}

In calling himself a quasi-eclectic, Rowe was defending his position as a respectful iconoclast. And, a bricoleur is one who ‘makes do with all manner of found or improvised cultural material’, building with what is at hand.\textsuperscript{14} The quasi-eclectic bricoleur is evident in Rowe’s first two popular essays, ‘The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa’ (1947) and ‘Mannerism and Modern Architecture’ (1950), both published in Architectural Review before his arrival in Austin. In each, the anachronistic pairings of 20\textsuperscript{th} century buildings with 16\textsuperscript{th} century counterparts are refutations of conjectures about modern architecture. Separated by four hundred years, Rowe’s comparisons conjure fictions that begin to reveal truths. In other words, Rowe’s ambichronous historiography was deployed in the modus vivendi of the design studio and history lectures in order to challenge the prevailing attitudes to design and history simultaneously.

**Episode 2: Louis Kahn’s Community Center**

Undermining modernism by improvising and assembling a range of images of buildings, quotes, and criticisms, Rowe seems to have been a pragmatist in the true philosophical sense. Treating ideas like tools for a task, Rowe’s historiography took the form of a myriad composite, pieced together with exquisite care, humility, and humor. The process of constructing the fiction was more important than the product of knowledge or truth. The bricolage was more about the act of composition than the composition itself. An undated manuscript for a lecture by Rowe begins:

> I would like to make a lecture entirely of quotes, a lecture in which all I had to do was to arrange their choice and their sequence. However, such a lecture – a performance of extreme self-denial – would involve both a capacity for work and an erudition which, neither of them, I possess.\textsuperscript{15}

Rowe wanted to be a bricoleur of quotes, taking what already exists and rearranging it to construct a story, a fiction, which provokes the student into curiosity. He was a pragmatist of words, which is an aspect of his craft that sometimes gets

\textsuperscript{13} Document in Rowe’s papers; credit for quote listed as ‘Denis Diderot quote by Steven Hurtt’, Colin Rowe Library, Charles Moore Foundation, Austin, Texas.

\textsuperscript{14} *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, Ted Honderich, Editor, 1995, s.v. ‘Claude Lévi-Strauss’, 482.

\textsuperscript{15} Lecture manuscript, Colin Rowe Library, Charles Moore Foundation, Austin, Texas.
overlooked.\textsuperscript{16} It would be inaccurate to suggest that Rowe’s historiography was entirely word-based, however. This episode with the iconic architect Louis Kahn relied on Rowe’s skills in the visual dimension, and their exchange requires some introduction to Rowe’s use of the verbal and visual.

There was always the dialectic of the word and the image. This happened in three different but related dimensions: the analytical, the historiographical, and the pedagogical. An example of the dialectic of word and image occurring analytically can be seen in Rowe’s Introduction to \textit{Five Architects} (1975), and his famous question:

\begin{quote}
If we believe that modern architecture did establish one of the great hopes of the world – always, in detail, ridiculous, but never, \textit{in toto}, to be rejected – then do we adhere to \textit{physique}-flesh or to \textit{morale}-word?\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

Modern architecture was analysed in terms of its rhetorical ethos (word), on the one hand, and its physical manifestation (image), on the other. The historiographical dimension of the dialectic could be seen in any number of Rowe’s lectures or essays for their balance and tension between propositions (words) and comparative examples (images), and episode three will detail this more specifically. The pedagogical dimension of Rowe’s teaching illustrates how the dialectic extended to the ‘historical lecture sequence’ and the ‘studio situation’ – in other words, the \textit{modus vivendi} of his teaching practice.

Furthermore, Rowe’s word-image dialectic could be considered in terms of skill and talent, respectively. Rowe wanted to be a \textit{bricoleur} of quotes and this was a skill he worked tirelessly to develop, yet his innate talents resided in the visual. Ironically, Rowe’s interest in the visual is probably best seen in his words and collected quotes. For example, a note of Rowe’s (Figure 3) indicates the importance he placed on appearance and curiosity – ‘Things are only interesting when they appear to be what they are not’\textsuperscript{18} – and his scribbled quote from Le Corbusier (Figure 4) clearly struck a chord with him: ‘In a complete and successful work of art there is a wealth of meaning only accessible to those who have the ability to see it, in

\textsuperscript{16} Because many tend to focus on the ‘pictorial’ or ‘frontal’ or ‘formal’ analyses of Rowe, the significance of the formalism in the structure of his verbal argument tends to be missed, and the performance of Rowe’s delivery of the content – whether in writing or speaking – is sometimes forgotten. See Braden R. Engel, ‘The Badger of Muck and Brass’, \textit{AA Files} 62, London: AA Publications, 2011, 95-103.


\textsuperscript{18} Note on document, Colin Rowe Library, Charles Moore Foundation, Austin, Texas.
other words to those who deserve it.’  Rowe loved this latter quote, and he used it repeatedly in lectures and essays that were initially born out of a contemplation of the side wall of La Tourette and the paintings of Mondrian. In some cases, Rowe’s visual talents and wordsmith skills cohered so effectively that they altered the path of other architects’ projects.

Figure 3: Colin Rowe, lecture manuscript; Colin Rowe Library, Charles Moore Foundation.

Figure 4: Colin Rowe, notes quoted from Le Corbusier: ‘In a complete and successful work of art there is a wealth of meaning only accessible to those who have the ability to see it, in other words to those who deserve it.’; Colin Rowe Library, Charles Moore Foundation.

Such was the case with Louis Kahn and his Jewish Community Center project for Trenton, New Jersey. Rowe had visited Kahn’s office late in the year of 1955, and Rowe later sent Kahn a letter with some sketches enclosed. In the letter, Rowe recounts how they had argued over Kahn’s early versions of the project, saying, ‘You wanted to GROW a building, and I, I think, suggested that I wanted to COMPOSE it.’²¹ The early plan was indeed a growth in its amoebic combination of octagons and squares which could seemingly spread across the site infinitely. Rowe mentions in his letter how he sent Kahn a copy of Rudolf Wittkower’s *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*, he inquires on the ‘possibilities of an appointment at the University of Pennsylvania’²² where Kahn was teaching, and even included his own sketches. His first drawing was a tracing of an ideal villa from Palladio (Figure 5), and the second was an overlaid abstraction (Figure 6). Rowe was thrilled with his drawings, as his note suggests:

²¹ Colin Rowe, letter to Louis Kahn, 7 February 1956, Colin Rowe Library, Charles Moore Foundation, Austin, Texas.
²² Colin Rowe, letter to Louis Kahn, 7 February 1956.
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Sorry I didn’t have any more coloured pencils because one could go on doing this sort of thing. Don’t you really find it fantastic the way all of the spaces here fluctuate, are alternatively positive and negative, etc. Also the way in which you could almost turn the plan inside out because everything is entirely constructed?

Rowe’s sketches clearly influenced Kahn’s project. The final version (of which only the famous Bath Houses remain) was a totally different scheme composed within a grid of rhythmic column bays. While others have attributed this design shift to Kahn’s access to the Wittkower book, what they have missed is that, even after receiving it, Kahn produced several more versions of his amoebic growth. Only after he received the sketches from Rowe did he change the project entirely. Kahn would later say that, after the Bath Houses were completed, he ‘never had to look to another architect for inspiration.’ This was Rowe’s unique ability: trained in both architectural design and art history, he was able – through is words, visual analyses, and drawings – to ignite invention by way of precedents.

There is also something to be appreciated about the way Rowe composed the drawings he sent to Kahn. His second page with the abstracted sketch makes one wonder which was executed first, the drawing or the type? Probably the drawing, so that fitting the type neatly within was more manageable; but then, one wonders why the type was placed where it was, and the shape of its paragraph, and so on. After all, the same text probably could have fit in the courtyard, with some minor typewriter maneuvers; but that would occupy the central void of the plan – the text would already be in the villa. No, no, that would not do. The text must be outside the villa, just outside, gathered by the extended arms like a congregation at St. Peter’s piazza, about to enter. But this is no amorphous crowd. This is a paragraph, a selection of letters and words that must be composed, and must follow an order. The shape of the paragraph centers itself both vertically and horizontally within the implied volume of space defined by the villa’s arms. By rule paragraphs are indented, and here the indent aligns the ‘S’ in the first word vertically with the secondary entrance to the cloistered courtyard on the left; and, if one draws a much larger ‘S’ on this sketch of Rowe’s, beginning at his ‘S’ (the inverse of how one might usually write an ‘s’), looping toward the axis of symmetry and up through the main entrance, turning left and through that secondary threshold to the cloister, and arcing right to finish the letter, one terminates at a point between the compressed threshold of the central entrance and the courtyard colonnade, which is also the geometrical center of Rowe’s drawing. It is here that one notices the emptiness of the courtyard in Rowe’s abstracted sketch. Empty, relative to the density of his paragraph below, anchoring the composition on the page. The sketch now begins to resemble Le Corbusier’s Villa Schwob elevation, with its empty but visually

magnetic white square. Tethered between this emptiness and Rowe’s text is the vertical axis of symmetry which passes perfectly through the termination of his final sentence, curiously, in an anomalous void between the final letter ‘d’ and the question mark ‘?’ Of course, such a space does not follow the rules of English writing and grammar, and it could be an arbitrary typing error. But, one must physically make that error, and, Rowe was famously calculated with the prose, cadence, structure, and in this case, visual composition of his writing.

Figure 5: Colin Rowe, Sketch over a Palladian ideal villa, part of letter to Louis Kahn, 7 February 1956.
Sorry I didn't have any more coloured pencils in the end so I couldn't do more. I wonder if you really find it fantastic the way all the spaces here fluctuate, are alternately positive and negative, etc. Also the way in which you could almost turn the plan inside out because everything is entirely contained in the square?

Figure 6: Colin Rowe, Sketch over sketch (image 5) of a Palladian ideal villa, part of letter to Louis Kahn, 7 February 1956.
Figure 7: Composite of Rowe’s first sketch (Figure 5) and Rowe’s abstracted sketch with type (Figure 6) in red, overlaid with axes of bilateral symmetry and paragraph alignment (blue), geometric center of drawing (orange), and ‘S’ path to center with highlighted space between ‘constructed’ and ‘?’ (green). Image by author.
Episode 3: ‘Chicago Frame’

It was also in 1956 that Rowe’s essay ‘Chicago Frame’ appeared, in which he made a distinction between the allure of the structural frame for its ‘empirical convenience’ in America and its ‘ideal significance’ in Europe. If the Palladian sketches serve as examples of Rowe’s craft in visual and verbal weaving, then ‘Chicago Frame’ will serve as an example of his didactic framing. In this essay Rowe’s historiography is one of meaning and significance, by which he cleverly avoids the very thing that means and signifies. He framed his essay in the ‘Chicago Frame’ so that his analyses operate at a level removed from the soot of modern industry.

Given the essay’s title, one might expect that Rowe is referring to the manufacturing enterprises of steel and concrete that constituted the structural frame of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. However, while Rowe does touch on this it is not the object of his essay. Instead, Rowe makes analogies between Chicago of the 1890s and the high points of the Gothic and Renaissance, he distinguishes between the fact of the frame in America and its idea in continental Europe, and his thesis concerns Frank Lloyd Wright’s rejection and distaste for the frame more than the frame itself. Since designing architecture was no longer accessible to him, this was Rowe designing an approach to the architecture of the past. Design knowledge engenders historical creativity.

So much is evident in the historical parallels he draws between the Chicago frame and the great periods of the past. The agency of the frame in mid-twentieth century architecture was, for Rowe, ‘equivalent to that of the column for classical antiquity and the Renaissance ( ... ) and, like the vaulting bay in the Gothic cathedral, it prescribes a system to which all parts are subordinate.’ The frame, column, and vault emerge with authority over the composition of the whole, and it is this production of a governing system that interests Rowe more than its name or unit. In each case, the system is seen as the essence of the canon it governed, and hence Rowe considers the architects of Chicago analogous ‘to that of the High Renaissance architects with Florence, or of the High Gothic architects to the Ile-de-France.’ This is all to build up the importance of the frame, to crown it as the essential and dominant figurehead of architecture, reigning from 1890s Chicago to the 1950s when the essay was written. And yet, in his third and final analogy to the Renaissance, Rowe makes an aesthetic distinction; although both the famous office

25 Colin Rowe, ‘Chicago Frame’, 90.
26 Colin Rowe, ‘Chicago Frame’, 90.
towers of Chicago and the illustrious Italian palaces share an interest in volume and surface – an ‘economy of motif’ with a ‘consistency of theme’ – in Chicago ‘they present no more than an unmodified surface exhibiting a rationally integrated and well-proportioned structure.’\textsuperscript{27} The depth and maturity implied by the Renaissance palazzo, for Rowe, could be seen in sharp contrast to the ignorant and adolescent American office building. If the former is the product of seasoned wisdom, the latter is the result of immediate convenience.

Or in Rowe’s words, it is a distinction between the ideal and the empirical. If the European inventors of architectural modernism were neo-Platonic in philosophy, then the American builders were pragmatists. Desirable for the protagonists of the \textit{zeitgeist} before the Great War and appealing to the social agenda of modernists post-war, in desperate need of reconstruction, the structural frame was to them, like Rowe, more than the frame itself. Its power was to be found in what it yielded, what it produced, what it represented. Across the Atlantic, on soil untouched by the war, the frame was utilized because it was, plainly, useful. ‘In Chicago it might be said that the frame was convincing as fact rather than idea’ Rowe says, while in Europe of the 1920s it ‘was much more often an essential idea before it was an altogether reasonable fact.’\textsuperscript{28} Mies made his own contributions to the rich architectural heritage of Chicago, of course, and it is not only in this way that he relates to Frank Lloyd Wright. Before Mies’ infamous monolithic towers he was concerned, spatially, with the compression, continuity, and direction of volumes in the horizontal. This concern Mies shared with Wright. But, while the steel frame would transcend into form itself for Mies, Wright showed no such interest. And herein lies Rowe’s thesis in his essay:

‘The frame, by so many modern architects, has been received almost as a heaven-sent blessing. Why, one inquires, has it been so distinctly rejected on the part of Wright?’\textsuperscript{29}

Wright’s ‘most marked distaste’\textsuperscript{30} of the steel frame employed in the Chicago towers is Rowe’s principal entry into his discussion, and it is also opens to an analysis of his analytical framing. This is to say, it is Wright’s evasion of the frame which is the topic of Rowe’s ‘Chicago Frame’, and it is Rowe’s evasion of the frame which allows him to stand in its shadow and elucidate its significance. Rowe concludes that Wright ‘was too close to [the Chicago frame] to be able to invest it with the iconographic content which it later came to possess.’\textsuperscript{31}

\textsuperscript{27} Colin Rowe, ‘Chicago Frame’, 93.
\textsuperscript{28} Colin Rowe, ‘Chicago Frame’, 100-101.
\textsuperscript{29} Colin Rowe, ‘Chicago Frame’, 96.
\textsuperscript{30} Colin Rowe, ‘Chicago Frame’, 93.
\textsuperscript{31} Colin Rowe, ‘Chicago Frame’, 108.
An icon is a sign, and for Rowe the ‘iconographic content’ of the structural frame is evidence of its significance. He concludes the very first paragraph of ‘Chicago Frame’ as follows:

Perhaps the role of the frame is most aptly summarized in the drawing by which Le Corbusier illustrated the structural system of his experimental Domino House, but, while its primary function is evident, apart from this practical value, the frame has obviously acquired a significance which is less recognized.\(^{32}\)

Rowe invokes an image that aptly summarizes the structural role of the frame, only to leave it behind and move on to significance. He shows the topic of the essay only to remove it as a magician shows the object he is about to make disappear.

This showing-and-removing happens throughout the essay. When addressing Wright’s formal discordance with the steel frame as an answer to his distaste, Rowe suggests a better answer might ‘be found to lie in the varieties of significance with which the frame has been endowed’.\(^{33}\) After perhaps his most lucid two paragraphs on the ‘fusion of space and structure’ in Wright and the International Style, Rowe states that the poetic aspirations of the latter were simply not possible for those of late nineteenth century Chicago, and this ‘must be partly explained by a different significance which was there attributed to the skeleton structure’.\(^{34}\) Considering Giedion’s comparison of the Reliance Building and Mies’ Glass Skyscraper project in *Space, Time and Architecture*, Rowe shifts his semiotic analyses from icons to symbols, ‘for, if the Reliance Building, very largely, is what it is, the glass tower, like the Maison du Peuple, very patently, is something which it does not profess to be – a highly charged symbolic statement’,\(^ {35}\) so that again, ‘they do [Burnham and Mies] impose upon their respective products a quite different significance’.\(^ {36}\) From here Rowe extends the scope of his analyses from dual building comparisons to the transatlantic, once again, so that ‘in Europe in the 1920s it might be said that the tall building such as Mies had here projected presented itself primarily as a symbol rather than as any object for use’.\(^ {37}\) And finally, for Wright and America, ‘where the frame served as no more than empirical convenience, it was scarcely to be invested with ideal significance’.\(^ {38}\)

\(^{32}\) Colin Rowe, ‘Chicago Frame’, 90.
\(^{33}\) Colin Rowe, ‘Chicago Frame’, 99.
\(^{34}\) Colin Rowe, ‘Chicago Frame’, 99.
\(^{35}\) Colin Rowe, ‘Chicago Frame’, 106.
\(^{36}\) Colin Rowe, ‘Chicago Frame’, 106.
\(^{37}\) Colin Rowe, ‘Chicago Frame’, 106.
\(^{38}\) Colin Rowe, ‘Chicago Frame’, 107.
Just as Wright was too close to the phenomena of the frame to provide its significance, so Rowe himself was too close to the aura of the frame to provide its analysis. He operated not on the empirical but in the ideal. He took joy not in the thing itself but that which it implied. Rowe — the incarnate cocktail of German art history and British architect manqué served on the rocks of Americana — delights in the semiotics of icons and symbols, himself the index of such a libation. Moreover, the body of Rowe’s essay is the significance of its title. The varying significance of the architecture produced by the structural frame in Europe and America is Rowe’s chief concern. To it, he ironically adds the frame itself only so that he may remove it.

When Jacques Derrida, in *The Truth in Painting* (1987), elaborated on Immanuel Kant’s curious definition of ‘ornaments’ in art as parerga, he yielded a potentially useful way of reading and rearticulating Rowe’s writing. From Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*:

> Even what we call *ornaments* (parerga), i.e., what does not belong to the whole presentation of the object as an intrinsic constituent, but [is] only an extrinsic addition, does indeed increase our taste’s liking, and yet it too does so only by its form, as in the case of picture frames, or drapery on statues, or colonnades around magnificent buildings.39

Derrida breaks the Greek term parergon into its etymological parts, where para means ‘beside’ or ‘apart from’, and ergon means ‘work’, thus:

> a parergon comes against, beside, and in addition to the ergon, the work done [*fait*], the fact [*le fait*], the work, but it does not fall to one side, it touches and cooperates within the operation, from a certain outside. Neither simply outside nor simply inside. Like an accessory that one is obliged to welcome on the border, on board [*au bord, à bord*].40

Rowe’s work (ergon) in the essay is the significance of the structural frame, which is brought in as an addition (parergon) to the essay. Crucially, Derrida reminds us, the parergon is not a mere fancy, but a necessary inclusion. That is, and not without irony, the parergon is a supplement that is essential:

> What constitutes them as parerga is not simply their exteriority as a surplus, it is the internal structural link which rivets them to the lack in the interior of the ergon. And this lack would be constitutive of the

very unity of the *ergon*. Without this lack, the *ergon* would have no need of a *parergon*.\(^{41}\)

Derrida’s structural metaphors aside, his deconstruction of *parergon* is particularly apt in the case of Rowe’s evasive framing of his analysis, and, if one is not yet convinced, there is a last dimension which should be considered.

*Parerga* are phantoms. They are dynamic phenomena which disappear as quickly as they appeared. Derrida refers to paintings and the tendency of a frame to remove itself from our perception when contemplating the piece it bounds. Then, as we shift our gaze to the wall, the frame leaps back onto the canvas. In order to elucidate and expound on the significance of the Chicago frame Rowe was forced to add, supplement, even scaffold his essay with the necessity it was lacking – namely, modern industry. The *parergon* of modern industry appears at moments only to hide behind a variety of guises, each corresponding to the many objects (*ergon*) of Rowe’s essay, such as the analogies to the Renaissance, the ideal-empirical distinction between Europe and America, Wright’s rejection of the frame, and, within each, the significance of modern industry in architecture rather than modern architecture itself. Rowe performs the phantom of *parerga* with unparalleled skill, and this reading of ‘Chicago Frame’ reveals it as one instance of a consistent and effective device in his *modus vivendi*. If this device is at first difficult to notice, it should not surprise, for as Derrida warned, ‘the *parergon* is a form which has as its traditional determination not that it stands out but that it disappears, buries itself, effaces itself, melts away at the moment it deploys its greatest energy.’\(^{42}\) Thus, as he moves in and out of it, between and around its members, the structural frame – and the influence of modern industry – efface themselves and melt away at the very moments Rowe is at his best. This is why, after reading ‘Chicago Frame’, one can recall very little talk of the Chicago frame.

If the category of *parergon* is a useful device for reconsidering Rowe’s historiography, then it will not be because it is merely an addition but because it is a necessary addition due to an inherent lack in the work. Rowe’s ‘Chicago Frame’ is only framed by the structural frame. It was a lack in the discourse on the significance of the Chicago frame that required Rowe’s addition, and not a lack in the structural frame itself. In the same way, Rowe’s framing of history could be seen as an addition to the practice of historiography, and as such, a necessary one required by an inherent lack in history itself.

Conclusion: Ambichronous Historiography

Returning to Texas for a final curiosity, an article from Harwell Hamilton Harris’ papers will help to conclude (Figure 8). It is a newspaper clipping from *The Daily Texan*, May 11, 1954:

After two months in Austin, Colin F. Rowe, architectural instructor from England, already has a favorable opinion of Texas. ‘Because of the brilliance of light, Texas creates for you the impression of being on a permanent Italian holiday,’ the new instructor said. (…) Mr. Rowe is impressed with the greater architectural equipment, such as libraries and slides that American universities have. ‘On the other hand, architecture students in England and France have more architecture to look at. Students are accustomed to the different styles over there.’

Explaining the difference in the two continents’ architecture, Mr. Rowe said that light on the North American continent distinguishes it from Western Europe. ‘Architecture has a better chance over here because you can see it — it’s not always wrapped in mist, except when there is a dust storm,’ he said.

Figure 8: Excerpt from *The Daily Texan*, May 11, 1954; University of Texas at Austin, Alexander Architectural Archives, Harwell Hamilton Harris Papers.

While Rowe would likely have disagreed with the title of the article, it is a telling document nonetheless. It speaks to the agency of the word-image dialectic. In order to be didactic, the visual must be articulated in words. Indeed, it is a popular appraisal to label Rowe a pictorial analyst, tipping the dialectic in favor of the image. But that is far too reductive. The reason Rowe liked Texas was not because he could see it. Rowe liked Texas because there was so much to see, and thus so much to be said.

This was the *modus vivendi* of a pragmatist bricoleur: the visual and the verbal as a constructed fiction that reveals truths; the seen, the spoken, and the drawn as weapons for refutations of traditional conjectures; the history lectures and the design studio; precedents as subjects to innovation in architectural design and the design of historiography. Rowe’s time at Austin in the 1950s marks perhaps his clearest expression of the *Ianus Architectus*, looking simultaneously into the past and future while innovating upon both. This ambichronous historiography pervaded every dimension of his work.

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